

This Week In Congress

August 30, 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Hearing from Veterans in Goodland

This week, I hosted a forum to allow veterans in Northwest Kansas an opportunity to discuss the delivery of benefits and health care through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and share their thoughts and concerns. Dr. Lawrence Biro, Director for the VA's Denver region, which includes six Northwest Kansas counties, was my guest.

Veterans left the forum with a three point pledge from Dr. Biro. First, Biro promised that the care veterans receive within the Denver region would be "second to none." Second, Biro pledged to expand and maintain the services that veterans receive. Third, he guaranteed that veterans would be personally satisfied with the care they receive within the Denver region and the VA system as a whole.

This was the third forum that I have held across the district, with others in Salina and Clay Center. As the age and number of our veterans increase, so will their need for benefits and health care services from the VA. This forum provided veterans with an opportunity to discuss their needs and the challenges they face with Dr. Biro, who is responsible for their care. Our country owes a tremendous debt to our veterans. By hearing directly from them, we can do a better job of providing veterans with the highest quality of care possible.

Working to Improve Coverage for Wheat Sprout Damage

On Monday, I responded to Ross Davidson, Administrator for the USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA). Recently, the RMA announced that some farmers who suffered quality loss from wheat sprout would not be eligible to receive crop insurance payments due to the method used to sample for wheat damage.

I am not pleased with the RMA's slow response and strict interpretation of their guidelines. Our Kansas farmers need assistance immediately, and bureaucracy should not stand in the way of common sense.

The RMA would like additional time to study this problem, but I have urged Mr. Davidson and the RMA to correct this problem in the quickest possible manner.

Honoring World War II Veteran, Edward Lutz of Spearville

On Wednesday, I presented Edward Lutz of Spearville with medals from his service in World War II, including the Bronze Star. In July, Lutz's daughter, Sandy Ackerman, contacted my office to ask if we could present her father with the medals that he had never received. I was pleased that we were able to accommodate the family's request. Sandy, her husband Gilbert, and their sons Cory and Scott were all on hand, along with members of the local VFW, for the presentation ceremony.

The medals presented to Mr. Lutz were the Bronze Star, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with Silver Star attachment and Arrowhead, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, World War II Honorable Service Lapel Button, and Marksman badge and rifle bar.

I was pleased to correct this oversight and finally present Mr. Lutz with the medals that he earned and deserved. I have visited the beaches of Normandy, where Mr. Lutz served, and can only imagine what it would have been like to live through those times. These brave men are called the Greatest Generation for a reason, and Edward Lutz exemplifies what it means to be a part of that heroic group.

Hospital Tours in Colby, Goodland, Norton and Ransom

The First District has 75 hospitals-the most of any congressional district-and this week I was able to visit four of them. The Colby Citizens Medical Center, Goodland Regional Medical Center, Norton Community Hospital and the Grisell Memorial Hospital District No. 1 in Ransom provided me with an excellent opportunity to meet with administrators, staff and patients.

During my visits, I was able to tour hospital facilities and speak to administrators and staff about the issues they face on a daily basis. Concerns expressed by the staff included lack of timely Medicare reimbursements and increasing frustrations with paperwork associated with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Due to the increased regulatory burdens that medical facilities face, their ability to provide quality care and attract and retain health professionals is becoming increasingly difficult.

The conversations that I had with these medical professionals reflect the concerns that many Kansans share about health care. I believe that the role of government should be to assist these community hospitals in providing them with the best possible care for Kansans. However, all too often, the government is restricting them with red tape and paperwork.

On the Road in the Big First

The past week has allowed me to spend time visiting with Kansans in various communities across the state.

Hays

On Monday, I was able to join Fort Hays State University (FHSU) students and members of the Hays community for their annual "Welcome Back" picnic. The picnic is an opportunity to welcome folks and showcase all that FHSU and Hays have to offer.

The stop also allowed me to talk about one of my other major priorities-education. Education, especially higher education, is critical for Kansas if we are to overcome the challenges we face and continue to prosper as a state. The federal government provides assistance to students in the form of grants and loans. Currently, Congress is debating funding for the federal government's student financial aid programs included in the Higher Education Act. Students will receive the majority of these funds through Pell Grants and other forms of financial aid. I believe the federal government should maintain its commitment to financial aid programs.

Larned

On Tuesday, I traveled to Larned. The visit allowed me to speak to approximately 60 Larned Rotary Club members and provide an update on activities in Congress. The conversations and questions from Rotary members mainly centered around homeland security and defense and what can be done on a local level to ensure safety for everyone. Additional concerns focused on healthcare issues and lack of an energy policy.

I look forward to taking their suggestions back with me to Congress as we begin to tackle the issues facing our state and nation.

Dodge City

On Wednesday, I visited Dodge City and joined the membership of the Chamber of Commerce for breakfast. The breakfast was held in the newly refurbished Santa Fe Depot. The depot remodel was made possible through a combination of federal and local funds and is an example of what can be done when multiple parties work together to achieve a common goal. While at the breakfast, I was able to provide a Congressional update and discuss the need for the extending the federal highway bill and passage of energy legislation.

Unfortunately, it appears that Congress is not going to act on this, due to reelection politics. This is discouraging to me, but I hold out hope that Congress will be able to work through these challenges and still make progress on the transportation plan before the end of the year.

In the Office

This week Roy and Eve Newton of Abilene, Heide Flaiz and Rick Neece of Kansas City and Jane Vajnar of Tampa stopped by my office for a tour of the Capitol.

Very truly yours,

Jerry